

February 5, 2002

Dear Supervisor Kinsey---

I'm writing about the writer's cabins at Mesa Refuge.

I'm a writer, I grew up in Marin County, I'm a long time Inverness resident, a professor at UC Berkeley, and an environmental activist. I served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997. I was named Educator of the Year in 1998 by the North American Association for Environmental Education for my work on local watershed education for children. I'm a member of the Board of Directors of the International Rivers Network. And I am a grateful supporter of your stewarding of the best interests of West Marin.

Forgive me for trotting out my resume but I've seen some of the letters written to the supervisors by some of the writers who have visited and worked at Mesa Refuge, and I thought it might be useful to you to hear from a writer who hasn't stayed there, who knows the region, and has some record of commitment to its preservation. I honor the idea of the refuge. It was an extraordinarily generous gesture. It's brought some very gifted people to our town, including at least one very good friend of mine. I'm sure they are grateful to the refuge for support of their work--writers are always grateful for support of their work--and that their impulse to defend the location of the sheds is based on that gratitude. But in truth their gratitude is not the relevant issue. The argument that the sheds should be left where they are because the writers who worked in them were inspired while they were there isn't very helpful. I'm sure I'd be inspired if someone built a shed on the lip of the Grand Canyon and invited me to work there. It might even be terrific for my work. But it would be unfortunate for the environment. Writers are often the worst offenders in this way, wanting the state of mind produced by solitude and so intruding on places whose main value is that no one has intruded on them. There is, I am afraid, something fundamentally silly about saying that encroaching on the habitat where wild creatures mate and nest and raise their young is really just fine because that encroachment allowed the writers the solitude to write about protecting nature. Protecting nature begins with protecting nature. That ought to be inspiration enough, I would think. So I hope a way can be found to enforce the rules and not to reward retroactive applications for buildings that are presented as *fait accompli*. As you know that was the way with building in West Marin for far too long and it is important for the Supervisors to be tough about it because getting people to honor building compacts, community development plans and zoning regulations has been a long struggle.

The painful difficulty in this is that the idea of building the refuge was a generous one. It's really too bad that the conception of the refuge has to be revised and adjusted to the health of the land it set out to honor. It's also painful that the owner whose generosity made the refuge possible has to bear the expense of making the alterations. But a solid way to insure the continuing environmental education of all of us is to move the sheds off the bluff, to let writers understand that they can find inspiration without usurping wild

places, and to find some other way to thank Peter Barnes for the generosity of his vision. I'm not a field biologist, but I assume that the relevant question is whether the sheds degrade that part of the watershed. If they do, they should be moved since they would not, presumably, have received a variance in the first place.

As a dues-paying member of the Environmental Action Committee, I also hope that the Supervisors are aware that our director Catherine Caufield is herself one of the best environmental journalists in this country, author of highly acclaimed books on the future of the rain forests and on the environmental policies of the World Bank and that the chairman of our board Jules Even, author of *The Natural History of Point Reyes*, is a field biologist and is simply the best writer about the natural life of Marin County we have. I don't know whether it's tragic or comic that so many gifted people who share so many of the same values have found themselves at odds in this way. I hope in your political wisdom you can find a way to honor their shared values while you insure that the fragile life on that bluff, the riparian life along the creek, the waters of the marsh and its creatures come first.

Thanks so much for your good work.

Sincerely,

Robert Hass